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ABSTRACT

Because of the threat of gangs, drugs and violence in their community, in the fall of 1990 16 African-American men started the Positive Impact Program (PIP) in Wynne, Arkansas for at-risk African-American boys. The program was originally developed to serve boys in kindergarten through eighth grade, but it has recently been made available to all youth. Wynne contains a poor neighborhood in which 95% of the 2,000 residents are black. Also, the unemployment rate is about 60% and about 70% of the residents are welfare recipients living below the poverty level. There are problems with teen pregnancy, drugs, violence, and gangs. The PIP program serves about 130 youth in grades K-8, about 43% of the black male youth population in the neighborhood. Three-fifths of the adolescent participants come from a one parent-household and 75% of them receive free or reduced-price lunch. The program has 17 adult advisors who supervise community service and work activities of the youth. The youngsters are encouraged to participate in tutoring services provided by advisors and teachers. PIP offers a comprehensive meeting of needs for at-risk youth in addressing concerns for their safety, academic success, relationship with peers and adults, emotional well-being, and cultural and recreational interests. Contains five references. (JE)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK YOUTH SERVED BY THE POSITIVE IMPACT PROGRAM (PIP)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK YOUTH SERVED BY THE POSITIVE IMPACT PROGRAM (PIP)

Because of the threat of gangs, drugs and violence in their community, in the fall of 1990 16 Black men started the Positive Impact Program (PIP) in Wynne, Arkansas, for at-risk Black boys. For the past four years the PIP organization has successfully worked with at-risk youth, their families, the schools and community personnel in prevention of destructive behavior by these youth. The program was originally developed to serve Black boys in kindergarten through grade eight, but has recently been made available to all youth.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the need for the PIP program, the characteristics of the Black youth it serves, and how PIP responds to their needs.

Need for a Youth Program

Wynne is a small community of 8,000 people in the Mississippi-delta in eastern Arkansas. The area is generally poor with much of the economy based on agriculture. Other than agriculture, the primary employer is Halstead Industries, maker of copper tubing products. Approximately 35% of the population of Wynne is Black. The town is markedly divided into a relatively well-to-do White neighborhood and a very depressed Black neighborhood. This Black section of town is isolated and distinctively bounded by two sets of railroad tracks, running north-south and east-west. Some of the folks in the Black neighborhood live in moderate income housing, but most are very poor and live in very small houses and trailers. There are few Black-owned businesses in Wynne, only a funeral home and two small mom-and-pop neighborhood convenience stores are owned by Blacks.

In the neighborhood: about 95% of the population of 2000 is Black; 40% of the homes are inhabited by single-parent families; there are approximately 800 children of school age or below; the unemployment rate is about 60%; and about 70% are welfare recipients living below the poverty level. Teenage pregnancy is a problem. Many of the single parents in the area are young, Black women, who themselves were teenage parents.

Most of the children in the predominantly Black area of town live in a single-parent home, generally headed by the mother, or grandmother. The area has high unemployment, particularly for young, Black males. Many of these young men have dropped out of school, have been involved in drugs and violence, and pose a real threat to the well-being and development of youth in the neighborhood.

The children's trips to and from school are dangerous. The children are constantly exposed to the threat of gangs and the prevalent availability of drugs and violence. According to the police and persons living in the community, these threats are markedly higher for this neighborhood than for any other area of town. Much concern has been expressed about the limited patrolling of the neighborhood by the police and the hesitancy of police to become involved in altercations in the Black community.

Other than the schools, there are limited services available to the youth in this neighborhood. Although there are nine Black churches located in the community, many of these children neither belong nor attend. The community has limited recreational facilities. There is one park located in the neighborhood which is popular with youth for sports activities, primarily basketball. The park area is frequented by the aforementioned older, unemployed Black males, many of whom have histories of drugs and alcohol abuse and violence. Historically, few Blacks participate in the community's youth baseball program.

Characteristics of Youth Served by PIP Program

Currently, the Positive Impact Program (PIP) serves about 130 at-risk youth (primarily Black males) in kindergarten through grade 8. This represents about 43% of the population of Black male youth in the Black neighborhood. In school, many children coming from this neighborhood receive free lunch, denoting a lower socio-economic status. Drug dealings and violent activities are common at bus stops.

Over the past three years, research studies have been conducted on the at-risk adolescent Black males in grades 6, 7 and 8 including those served by the Positive Impact Program. Three-fifths of the PIP adolescents come from a one-parent household and three-fourths of them receive free or reduced-price lunch at school. On the average in school, they perform in classes at about "C" level (1.97) and their standardized test scores fall about one standard deviation below the national average (Cobbs, 1992).

Based on the Nowicki-Strickland measure of locus of control, these at-risk students in grades 6, 7 and 8 are more externally controlled than a normative sample of males (Howerton, Enger & Cobbs, 1993). Also, several significant negative relationships were found between locus of control and academic achievement for these at-risk Black males (Howerton, Enger & Cobbs, 1993). The results indicate this generalized locus of control measure can be used to explain some of their school performance.

In a study of 42 of these adolescent Black males identified "at-risk" by their teachers, the overall Coopersmith self-esteem score was significantly lower than most means reported for normative studies (Howerton, Enger & Cobbs, in press). Self-esteem was significantly related to their academic achievement as measured by overall grade point average and Stanford Achievement Test composite score. Grade-wise, self-esteem was significantly related to social studies and English grades. Test-wise, self-esteem was significantly related to science and mathematics subtests of the Stanford Achievement Test.

In assessing relationships between self-esteem, locus of control, and parental verbal interaction for these at-risk Black male adolescents, a moderate negative relationship was found between locus of control and self-esteem (Enger, Howerton & Cobbs, 1994). This result differed from a previous study which found no significant relationship for Black elementary children. A moderate positive relationship was found between self-esteem and parental verbal interaction. A weak, negative relationship was found between locus of control and parental verbal interaction.

Description of the Positive Impact Program (PIP)

Overview of PIP

The organizational chart for the Positive Impact Program is presented in Table 1. The core of the organization is the 17 male volunteers who serve as officers and advisors. The volunteer PIP advisors meet each Monday evening (52 meetings a year) for generally one to three hours to discuss concerns and plan activities for the youth. The youth meet in small groups with their respective PIP advisors each week (52 meetings a year) for generally one to two hours. PIP youth, parents and advisors meet in a large gathering monthly to discuss PIP activities and for special programs.

How Youth are Identified

Teachers are asked to identify at-risk youth who may be invited for membership in PIP (Cobbs & McCallum, 1992). Teachers identify these students as "at-risk" based on their home situation and eight characteristics: (1) low self-esteem, (2) lack of motivation, (3) poor academic record, (4) chronic disciplinary problems, (5) poor school attendance, (6) poor hygiene and personal-care habits, (7) poor social skills, and (8) a disrespect for authority. When youngsters enter the Positive Impact Program, they and their parents must agree to abide by a number of rules, including a curfew, working in school, and demonstrating respect for others.

PIP Advisors

There are currently 17 advisors who comprise the PIP organization. PIP advisors must have a positive reputation in the community, be a committed family man, be drug and alcohol free, and be committed to helping youth. Table 2 identifies the current advisors and officers. As shown in Table 2, the PIP advisors come from all walks of life, including factory workers, retired men, and school personnel. The current president and vice-president of PIP are school administrators, who are accustomed to the student service routine.

PIP advisors supervise community service and work activities of the youth generally one to four hours on weekends (about 26 days a year). PIP advisors supervise group trips lasting for eight hours to two days for education and recreation purposes (about six day a year). PIP advisors regularly attend conferences to address at-risk youth needs.

Because of interest in their program, PIP advisors are often asked to address people in other communities who have concerns about youth in their neighborhoods, including threats of gangs, drugs and violence. PIP advisors make about 12 presentations in other communities each year. In addition, PIP advisors address professional associations about three times each year. After four years, the Positive Impact Program continues to serve the needs of youngsters in the community with mostly the same volunteer advisors who started the program.

PIP Activities

The strategies employed by PIP demonstrate to the community the positive aspects of youth through their community involvement, including helping the elderly, engaging in self-supporting activities, and promoting community goals. PIP activities for youth include: weekly small group meetings with a role model advisor, monthly large group meetings for parents and youth, tutoring, work/community service activities, and travel for education/recreation.

The youngsters are encouraged to participate in tutoring services provided by advisors and teachers. On weekends and during the summer months, the PIP youth participate in community service activities (including helping older citizens in the community with care of their homes and yards), working in agriculture endeavors (such as picking blueberries and maintaining a seven-acre garden), attending programs with role-model speakers, and traveling to events and locations for both educational and recreational purposes.

In some PIP activities, advisors have become very involved in responding to community needs. Even during the past year, police composed two lists showing youngsters identified with two different gangs. The PIP advisors invited the parents of these youth to a private meeting in which the realities of gang membership in the community were discussed. Many of the boys and young men in the neighborhood have been in trouble and picked up by the police. Youngsters involved in PIP are notable exceptions, with an average of less than two such incidents in each of the last four years.

Discussion

The Positive Impact Program works effectively with various facets of the community. These include county government, city government, the judicial system, the police department, local schools, churches, other service organizations, and local businesses. Both the Positive Impact Program and its advisors are highly respected in the community for their concern for youth and ability to interact with various community agencies. The Positive Impact Program (PIP) has a proven record of cooperation and mutual support from schools, service organizations, local government, juvenile justice and law enforcement agencies.

PIP provides role models for at-risk youth, a service not offered by any other local agency. PIP involves both the family and school personnel in identifying and meeting the needs of these at-risk youth. PIP offers an alternative to gangs; there is no other group alternative (other than church activities) for youth in this neighborhood. PIP offers a comprehensive meeting of needs for the at-risk youth in addressing concerns for their safety, academic success, relationship with peers and adults, emotional well-being, and cultural and recreational interests. PIP provides challenging new opportunities for growth. For example, other than the school health curriculum, no other existing community service addresses drugs, violence and gang membership with at-risk youth from this neighborhood. There are no existing services that adequately serve the comprehensive needs of these at-risk youth the way that PIP does.

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Table 1

Positive Impact Program Organizational Chart

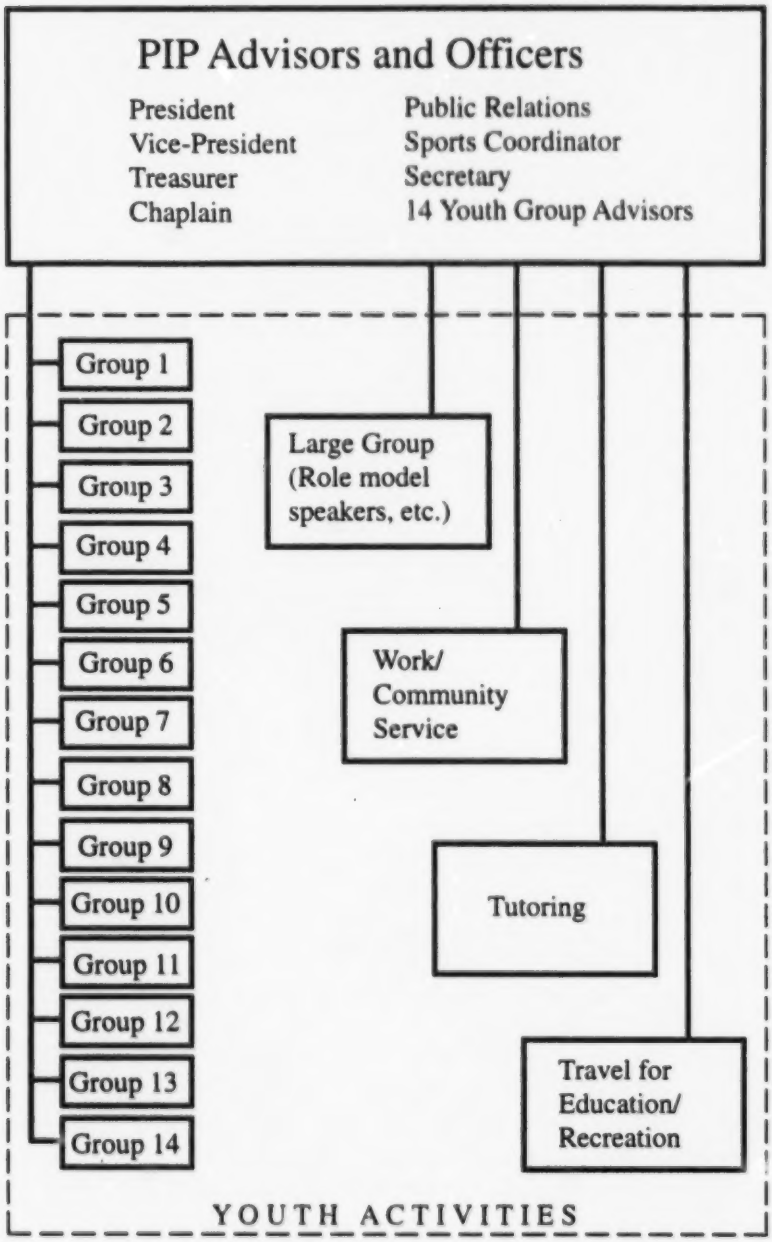

Table 2

Positive Impact Program Advisors

Name	PIP Office	Employer	Position
Charles Cobbs	President	Wynne Public Schs	Jr. High Principal
Odell McCallum	Vice-president	Wynne Public Schs	Elem. Principal
Jack Shaw, Jr.	Treasurer	Wynne Public Schs	High Sch. Counselor
T. Artis Warren	Chaplain	Addison Shoe Fact.	Dept. Supervisor
Felix Cross	Public Relations	Halstead Metals	Mail Clerk
Freddie McGill	Sports Coor.	Cross Co Schools	Job Coach
Charles Wimbush	Secretary	Wynne Public Schs	Jr. High Counselor
Mel Smith		Self Employed	Minister/Landscape
David McGill		Halstead Metals	Lab Foreman
Henry Thompson		Halstead Metals	Ban Bury Operator
Williams Clemmons		was Halstead	Retired
Clyde Collins		Duff-Norton Corp.	Machine Operator
Charles Jeffrey		Halstead Metals	Machine Operator
Charles Marrs		Halstead Metals	Fork Lift Driver
Johnnie Walker		Halstead Metals	Plug & Die Tech.
Freddie Smith		Self Employed	Grocery Store Owner
Cornelius Clark		Green Thumb	Park Maintenance